**Good Friday 2017 Meditations**

This afternoon I want us to spend a little more time with some of the bit players, some of whom I mentioned on Palm Sunday. More time with Pilate, more time with the soldiers, time with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We shall spend time in silence. We shall sing a hymn or two and we shall listen to music. Later, during the liturgy of the day we shall spend time with Mary.

Perhaps my main question in these reflections is where is morality? Pilate is a curious figure. I do not get the impression that he warms to the Jewish authorities. He tries to give Jesus back to them for judgement, but with their thoughts centred on execution, they seek to abnegate that responsibility and give it into the hands of this foreign governor. They do not even state the nature of the crime Jesus is alleged to have committed. The conversation between Jesus and Pilate can be read in different ways. Is Pilate genuinely interested in Jesus? Are his questions about kingship defensive, a threat to his and the emperor’s authority? Or does he perceive a greater authority in this strange man? Again and again he attempts to release Jesus. Again and again he says that he does not find him guilty of anything. Does he quite simply not want the responsibility of organising a crucifixion or does he not want the responsibility of sending an innocent man to his death? He falls into automatic cruelty mode as he has Jesus flogged. The enforcement of the Pax Romana. Perhaps he imagines Jesus will confess a crime. Yet he does not crumble and plead. When the Jewish authorities tell Pilate that he has said that he is the Son of God, Pilate is genuinely frightened. This is a man not without a sense of something beyond the here and now or does one simply attribute it to superstition and a fear of the retribution of the gods. Again the Jewish authorities appeal to Pilate’s self-interest when they say they have no other king than the emperor. There is the residual fear that if this gets out as a potential incident, he will be obliged in true Roman style to fall on his sword. So Pilate allows himself to be swayed by the crowd and the Jewish authorities, swayed not into believing something he does not believe, but swayed into allowing something to take place which he knows is wrong. His morality is put to one side. His actions are not in concert with his beliefs. The designation on the cross is the only stand he manages. But of course, this is something that we all have to manage. It is chiefly in our omissions that we are guilty, that our moral compass is skewed. Are there times when we have not stood up to be counted but allowed something just to happen. It takes effort, it takes courage, it takes being prepared to be unpopular. The church has not always had a good track record, one only has to think of the church in Germany that bolstered the Hitler regime until the confessing church took its stand. The example of Pilate is a salutary one for all of us. We can condemn his weakness but only if we are certain we have never been weak. His morality is indeed compromised, but are there times when our own morality is likewise challenged?

A sonnet by Malcolm Guite: Jesus is condemned to death p 37

NHW 5 Ah Holy Jesus how has thou offended?

Silence

So what of the soldiers? We first meet the soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane when they arrive with Judas and the temple police to arrest Jesus. This is a curious encounter because they arrive armed in order to arrest the Prince of Peace. What they encounter is authority and they simply do not know what to do with it. They would have known what to do had they encountered resistance whether physical or verbal. They would then have been able to resort to their training. But all they encounter is a courteous question asking for whom they are seeking to which reply, he says “I am he”. This is not the way they are used to arresting people. They bind him because that is the only way they know, yet it is not needed because he goes with them willingly. We next meet the soldiers when Pilate has Jesus flogged. These are mindless brutes who enjoy what they do. They enjoy the mockery, the crown of thorns. These are the same soldiers who will nail him to the cross. And they will do this carefully to ensure the maximum suffering. They will carefully drive the nails through the wrists to ensure the fixing remains, they will drive the nails through the feet and put a support underneath so that the victim will every now and again push on the support which will increase the suffering. This is a slow death by asphyxiation and theirs is a practised art. These are the same soldiers who will then have no compunction about dividing his clothes as they sit watching their victims die. They know about death. They know that if death is to be speeded up then they will need to break the legs so that they can no longer push on the support to prolong the agony. But as Jesus has died they simply put a spear into his side, just to make absolutely certain. These soldiers are cruel, they are brutal but are they immoral, are they even amoral? They are quite simply part of the Roman machine, they are part of the way in which the Pax Romana is maintained. They have been taught, trained not to feel. After all, what effect would it have on discipline if they allowed a moral system to get in the way? The question I would like to pose is “is it any different now?” it is still the case that soldiers are trained not to question orders and to an extent they are trained not to feel, otherwise how could they take life. Yes, these are not all brutal people and of course we have the Geneva convention which is there to regulate the way in which prisoners are treated. We were all horrified by the footage of Sgt Blackman’s treatment of a prisoner yet this was not a bad man but a loving husband and father. I may have already told you that when I was a curate I had responsibility for an estate, part of which was military housing for the NATO Allied Rapid Reaction Corps and observed the difficulty which these men often had when they returned home from a tour of duty. They had seen too much but had also been trained not to feel in a sense and they found it almost impossible to reintegrate into family life. A member of our congregation had been an officer in the Air Force and I remember vividly a conversation with him when he was talking about the need to train the military to take their place back in civilian life. It is not an easy transition perhaps particularly because of the different natures of the moralities that are in play. So yes, morality does not play a significant part in the actions of the soldiers in crucifying Jesus, but can we expect that it would?

Sonnet by Malcolm Guite: Jesus is nailed to the cross p 42

NHW From heaven you came 66

Silence

And now we come to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus – we remember Nicodemus who came by night to see Jesus and his wrestling with the idea of being born again of water and the spirit. Joseph of Arimathea is a new figure. But what we know about both of them is that they are clandestine followers of Jesus. They are both part of the establishment and have operated out of fear. They have not had the courage to come out and say that they believe Jesus’ claims are true. I find myself wondering whether Joseph’s visit to Pilate was also clandestine and how did he remove the body of Jesus? The great masters have given us many pictures of the deposition, the removal of Christ from the cross, but I am tempted to think that this happened under the watchful eye of the Romans without the Jewish authorities being around. Nicodemus comes out of the woodwork with myrrh and aloes to anoint the body. It is interesting that John even gives us the weight! It seems that both these men are somehow seeking to redeem themselves for having remained clandestine during the lifetime of Jesus. Although it appears they are still acting in secret, it become less dangerous when one has dealings with a dead body rather than with a living person who is thought to be subversive. One could almost think that in their minds they are acting on behalf of the Jewish authorities. But of course what they do is all important in the context of the resurrection. They take Jesus’ body, they anoint it and lay it in a tomb. They perform the appropriate burial rites in wrapping the body with the spices in a linen winding sheet. But again my question is where is their morality? Is it ok to seek to make amends when it is seemingly too late? It is a question for all of us. How many of us are clandestine disciples? How many of us are really good at being up front about our Christian faith and what it means to us? I am always conscious when I baptise infants or even adults when I ask them not to be ashamed of the faith of Christ that this can be a big ask if they find themselves in hostile environments. Yesterday at the Chrism Mass we were given Easter Cards to take away and distribute randomly in our parishes. This is a wonderful idea but immediately it poses the question, are we going to do this clandestinely, pop a card through early in the morning or when we are sure they are out or in the evening? Of course the important thing is that we do it, but I suspect you might feel slightly nervous about engaging in conversation. I return to Joseph and Nicodemus. There are of course legends about Joseph of Arimathea travelling to England and going to Glastonbury and establishing Christian communities. But the question remains: is our morality skewed if we are not able to admit to our beliefs and feel obliged to keep them quiet out of fear? This is not an easy question and we could of course point to the hidden church in the Czech republic which had to remain clandestine in order to survive and indeed flourish. One could also cite countries where there is persecution in store for those who confess their faith. Perhaps the most important thing to hang on to is the grace of God and the redemption that is offered us through the cross. Whether our moralities are in tatters or not, the grace of God is always and abundantly on offer and that is what we are reminded of in these days of Holy Week and Easter.

Poem: Malcolm Guite p 43 Jesus is laid in the tomb.

NHW 115 I cannot tell (Londonderry Air)

Silence

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Eternal God, in the cross of Jesus we see the cost of our sin and the depth of your love: in humble hope and fear may we place at his feet all that we have and all that we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen